

THE AMERICAN
NATIONAL PREACHER.

No. 7. NEW-YORK, DECEMBER, 1832. Vol. 7.

SERMON CXXXIV.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

ALBANY, N. Y.

THE GOD OF THE CHRISTIAN AND THE GOD OF THE INFIDEL.

PSALM lxxxvi. 8.—*Among the gods, there is none like unto thee, O Lord.*

THE existence of a God is a fundamental principle of all religion. The mind, whenever this doctrine is presented to it, instantly perceives that it is grasping an idea of immense importance; and that, before it has paused to survey its momentous and infinitely extended bearings. But when considered in its relations to the material and the immaterial world, to every object in the wide range of thought, it gathers an interest which the mind, in its loftiest aspirings, is inadequate to comprehend; being a sort of dividing line between the territories of light and the territories of darkness; between a region illumined by the acknowledgment of the active presence of a God, and a region over which hang the clouds, and shadows, and curses of Atheism.

But it must be acknowledged that, while the existence of a God lies at the foundation of all religion, this momentous truth derives much of its importance from the character which is attributed to him. Laying out of view the gods of the heathen, to which our text may be supposed to have had especial reference, we all know that the Supreme Being has been invested with a variety of character by those who have professed their belief in the spirituality of his nature. I purpose in this discourse to bring before you *the God of the infidel, and the God of the Christian*; and to inquire *which is most likely to exalt the character of man; which best adapted to meet his necessities.*

I. Let us compare the God of the infidel and the God of the Christian.

1. The infidel's God is a being of *uncertain attributes*: the character of the Christian's God is *fixed and certain*.

If you cast an eye through the records of deism, you can hardly fail to be struck with the fact that there are scarcely two individuals who acknowledge the same God. Some of them have conceived of the divine Being in a manner imperfect indeed, but in some degree just; have uttered sublime senti-

ments both in respect to his attributes and his works, and have even seemed to feel some lofty aspirations in contemplating his character. There are others whose conceptions on this subject are more inadequate and gross, and who, while they profess to acknowledge the spirituality of God, invest him with properties or attribute to him actions which are scarcely consistent with it. And there are others still, who, though they will admit in the general the divine existence, yet seem scarcely to recognise the difference between nature and nature's God; leaving it doubtful on which side they stand of the line that divides deism from atheism. And not only is there a sad disagreement on this subject between different individuals, but the views of the same individual are often, in a high degree, inconsistent and contradictory. I say then that the infidel's God is a being to whom no fixed character belongs. Some things indeed on this subject all infidels hold in common; but there are so many particulars in which they disagree, and withal so much self-contradiction, that if we should attempt to describe minutely the object of the infidel's professed homage, we should seem to describe not one God but "gods many."

Not so with the being whom the Christian worships. Whether we look at each of the various attributes of which his character is composed, or at the whole in glorious combination, we see the indubitable impress of certainty. There is much indeed in this character, which the human mind is, and for ever will be, too limited to grasp; nevertheless, so far as its knowledge extends, it is accurate and certain. Hence we find that in every clime, in every age, the God whom Christians adore is the same;—"the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever."

Nor is this difference between the God of the infidel and the God of the Christian difficult to be accounted for. For the infidel depends for his knowledge solely upon the deductions of his own reason; a guide which is often bewildered or bribed through the influence of passion; and which in its best state sheds but an imperfect light on the character of the Highest. The Christian, on the other hand, has the object of his supreme homage faithfully described;—described by the very hand of Almighty God: and the description is so plain that an honest mind can never mistake it. Is it strange that the infidel's God should have no fixed character, when it is left to human reason to decide what his character is? Or is it strange that the Christian's God should be everywhere and at all times the same, when it is remembered that *his* character is matter of infallible record?

2. The God of the infidel is little more than a mere distant spectator of events: the God of the Christian is everywhere, in the exercise of a sustaining, controlling and all-gracious energy.

The being whom the infidel calls God, if we can believe the infidel's own representations, reposes in a kind of indolent majesty, exercising but little regard towards the works of his hands. He is indeed supposed to have established some general laws for the government of his creation; but these laws are commonly spoken of in a manner which scarcely seems to imply a law-giver, and as if they were left to execute themselves. It may be admitted that he takes some cognizance, and exercises some interest in respect to the grander events which occur both in the physical and moral world; that he keeps the planets in their orbits, and guides the revolutions of empires; but with the lesser and every-day concerns of life it is supposed that he has little

to do. His providence, instead of implying a divine energy diffused everywhere, and operating in every thing, is, at best, a sort of indefinite superintendence of his works, which may leave even man himself to become the sport of accident. And the reason of this is, that the infidel in this respect forms his idea of God from looking into his own bosom: he finds there a spirit of abominable arrogance, which disdains every thing in which he cannot fancy something of greatness or majesty; and he attributes the same character to the object of his professed homage.

The Christian's God, on the other hand, not only fills all space, but fills it with an active and controlling energy. Like the God of the infidel, he has established general laws for the regulation of his empire; but this does not supersede his unremitting vigilance, and care, and activity. He is present in all worlds to control the events of each; and while the whole system of things moves on exactly in accordance with the dictates of his will and of his wisdom, his regards are as intensely fixed upon the destiny of the obscurest individual, or even upon the unfolding of a flower or the motion of an atom, as if it were the only object to engross his infinite mind. True it is his energy that wheels around the planets; that thunders in the storm; that empties the volcano; that blazes in the lightning; that breathes in the wind; but it is alike his energy that sustains the beating pulse of the humblest child of want, that keeps you in existence from hour to hour and moment to moment; that operates in every thing that presents itself to you either as an object of sense or of thought. As nothing is too grand, so nothing is too insignificant for his eye and his providence to reach. The worm that creeps upon his footstool, and the angel that burns before his throne, are alike within the range of his vision, within the control of his arm, within the circle of his regard. He is arrayed not only in the majesty of infinite wisdom and infinite power, but also in the majesty of infinite condescension.

3. The God of the infidel we can contemplate only in his abstract perfections: the attributes of the Christian's God are embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

There are two ways in which the infidel may form his conclusions in respect to the character of God. He may carefully inspect the elements of his own intellectual and moral nature, and may find in them some faint resemblance to some of the divine perfections. For instance, his idea of power or of knowledge is originally obtained by reflecting upon the operations of his own mind; and by indefinitely magnifying these qualities as they exist in himself, he attains to a conception of the omniscience and the omnipotence of God. Or else he looks abroad upon the divine works, and surveys their harmony, their grandeur, their adaptation to their various ends, and hence forms his opinion of the character of him who built and who preserves this stupendous fabric. Now I admit that all this is fair and legitimate argumentation; and I do not deny that in either of these ways it is possible to arrive at just conclusions in respect to some of the divine perfections. But I maintain that the attributes of God, viewed merely in this light, are clothed with a sort of abstraction, which is fitted rather to make the mind pause and reflect upon its own littleness, than to bring its powers into exercise in acts of intense and grateful homage.

But Christianity entirely relieves this difficulty. The Christian's God comes out as it were from behind the veil of his abstract perfections, and

brings himself directly in contact with our thoughts and feelings, I had almost said with our very senses, in the person of Jesus Christ. Here God is manifest in the flesh: the divine glory, as it shines in the face of his Son, is so softened, that we can gaze upon it without being overpowered by the vision. The actions of a God we can here view; the attributes of a God we can here contemplate; the authoritative declarations of a God we can here listen to, through the medium of a nature like our own. Oh, what condescension is here! Without diminishing aught from the majesty of the eternal and uncreated Spirit, Christianity brings that majesty, if I may be allowed the expression, within the immediate range of human vision; for "in Him," that is, in Jesus Christ, says the apostle, "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily."

4. The God of the infidel is *at best only the God of nature and providence*: the God of the Christian is *also the God of redemption*.

To the former let as much of perfection be attributed as reason can possibly conceive: be it that the infidel's God has made the heavens and the earth; that all that is beautiful, and grand, and useful in creation is the work of his hand. Be it that He rules the worlds which he has made by a providence, no matter how particular; that by his immediate agency he circulates the vital fluid in your veins, and arranges the most minute circumstances of your condition, and takes cognizance of every thing that passes within his dominions—though this is attributing more to the infidel's God than the infidel would himself attribute to him—but surely this is all. It is not even claimed for Him that He is a redeeming God. If the fact that man is a sinner is contemplated at all in the plan of his government, it is contemplated only as a sort of accidental matter which requires no distinct provision.

The Christian's God possesses every perfection and performs every work which the infidel attributes to *his* God. He is the creator of the ends of the earth, and he fainteth not, neither is weary, in upholding all things by the word of his power; and there is not a sparrow that falls to the ground, nor a leaf that trembles in the breeze, but his providence extends to it. But in addition to all this, and beyond all this, he is the God of redemption. In this character he exhibits himself in the mysterious threefold relation of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. In this character there is a new and more magnificent display of his attributes; a softening of those which appeared stern, a blending of those which seemed opposite, justice and holiness and faithfulness and mercy, all beaming forth in man's salvation. Here, after all, is the grand distinction between the God of the infidel and the God of the Christian. The one is, and the other is not, encircled with the glory of a Redeemer. The one is, and the other is not, reconciling the world to himself by Jesus Christ.

II. Keeping this contrast of character in view, let us proceed to inquire *whether the infidel's or the Christian's God is best adapted to exalt the character of man; and to meet his necessities.*

1. Which is best adapted to *exalt the human character*?

That we may come to a satisfactory conclusion on this point, let us see whether a belief in the one or the other is fitted to exert the *greatest amount* of influence.

That a belief in the Christian's God is the more influential is evident from the fact that *He is a Being with whom man is brought into more immediate*

contact. Of two objects, other things being equal, that exerts the most powerful influence, which bears most directly upon our condition, which mingles itself most with our thoughts, and operates upon us most constantly, and meets us in the greatest variety of circumstances. But we have seen that the infidel's God is a being who takes comparatively little interest in human concerns; that he is too lofty to condescend to the meaner affairs of this world, and is clothed with a degree of abstraction which seems to remove him almost beyond the range of human conceptions. We have seen, on the other hand, that the Christian's God meets him everywhere; that He is the strict observer of all his actions; that he marks even the most secret feelings of his heart with reference to a retribution; that in infinite condescension he manifests himself through the medium of man's own nature; and that the whole scheme of his government in respect to redemption is fitted to keep the eye of man intensely fastened upon the character of God. Who then can doubt that a belief in the God of the Christian is the most operative!

Then again, a belief in the Christian's God exerts the greatest amount of influence, because *there is far more in his character to make an appeal to the active principles of our nature.* Take, for instance, the principle of gratitude, one of the most powerful principles of the human breast—how much more is there to waken this into exercise in the character of the Christian's God than of the God of the infidel! How much more has the former done than the latter, how much more is he doing every hour, especially as the God of redemption, for the benefit of man! Confidence too—another powerful principle of action—there is much more in the Christian's God to awaken this; for not only does he confer greater present benefits than the other, but he has condescended to make the most glorious promises, and write them down, and even seal them with blood, and moreover fulfils them in the Christian's every-day experience. And even the principle of fear, the Christian's God appeals to with more success than the God of the infidel; for the awful attributes of his character come forth with more distinctness, and his threatenings are a matter of fearful and certain record, and even while he sits upon the throne of his mercy, He proclaims to every sinner that he is in danger of everlasting burnings. And the same is true of all the other active principles of man's nature: a belief in the God of the Bible is incalculably more sovereign in its influence over them than a belief in the God of the infidel.

We arrive then, on two separate grounds, at the conclusion, that a belief in the Christian's God exerts the greatest amount of influence. But we all know that a cause may operate powerfully, and yet not benignly, upon the human character. It is necessary therefore, in order to establish the point we have in view, to show that the same belief exerts not only the greatest amount, but the *noblest kind*, of influence.

And that we may come at the truth on this point in a single word, let me ask you to bear in mind that *from the very constitution of our nature, our characters become assimilated to the object of our supreme homage.* The only question then is, if indeed it be a question, whether the infidel's God or the Christian's God is the more excellent and glorious? If you doubt, then say whether you regard that Being the more glorious who has no certain character, or the Being whose character is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever! Whether is it more glorious to take a sort of general supervision of the works of his hands, leaving much to the caprice of accident, or to behold every

thing with an eye of watchful regard, and to direct every thing by the dictates of infinite wisdom? Or is it more glorious to exist merely in the abstract perfections of his nature, or to exhibit his attributes in higher though softer majesty in the person of his Son? Or finally, is it more glorious to exist only as the Creator and the Ruler of the world, or also as its Redeemer; to put forth no effort for the salvation of man, or to make a new and loftier development of his character, and to exhibit a union of apparently opposite attributes in the combined grandeur and loveliness of a righteous and forgiving God? The Christian's God then does possess a more exalted character than the God of the infidel: it follows therefore, from the law of our nature to which we just adverted, that a belief in the former exerts the nobler influence.

Our first inquiry then is answered. If a belief in the God of the Christian exerts at once the greatest amount of influence, and the noblest kind of influence, we come fairly to the conclusion that it is best fitted to exalt the human character.

But I cannot dismiss this point without making an appeal to *facts*. Consult then the records of infidelity and the records of Christianity, or bring your own observation to testify on this subject, and tell me where you find the most of true moral dignity and excellence. I do not say that you cannot point me to a character which has been formed under the influence of a belief in the infidel's God, that is not entirely shorn of the naturally amiable qualities that belong to human nature; but I challenge you to point me to one, which, in the sober estimate of even the infidel's conscience, exhibits a high degree of moral virtue. You may now and then find a man of this description, who is inoffensive in his intercourse with his fellow-men, and whose character is not stained with open vice; but never will you find one of lofty virtuous aspirations; never one whose actions are conformed to a high standard of moral excellence; and in the great majority of instances (I dare say it with all the records of infidelity spread out before me) you will find the infidel a selfish, grovelling, not to say a malignant being. He, on the other hand, who sincerely trusts and devoutly worships the Christian's God, exhibits a character which bears the genuine impress of moral worth. Not only the external actions, but the thoughts, the purposes, the feelings, the whole man rises up continually towards the perfection of virtue. Where will you find characters formed by faith in the infidel's God like those of Howard, and Wilberforce, and Thornton, and Edwards, and a multitude of others, whose names illumine the record of Christianity? Bring by the side of these the names of Paine, and Bolingbroke, and Rousseau, and the whole catalogue of their associates, and the infidel himself, if he has not bid adieu to shame as well as to virtue, must blush at the comparison.

2. Our second inquiry is, whether the God of the infidel or of the Christian is best adapted to *meet man's necessities*?

Man needs a *guide*. His lot is cast in a world in which a variety of paths sometimes open before him, and he is at loss which of them either his duty or his safety requires that he should take. Some of these paths are thickly beset with snares, and he cannot enter them but at an incalculable hazard. There are opposite influences to which he is liable to yield, some of which may subvert his advantage, others conduce to his injury, and he is in danger of mistaking the one for the other. Hence he needs a faithful and infallible guide, whom he may consult with confidence in every variety of con-

dition. Such a guide he cannot find in his fellow-man; for he is as weak and ignorant, and liable to mistake as himself. It can be no other than the Infinite God; and let me say, it is the Christian's God, and not the God of the infidel. For what encouragement is there to apply for direction to the latter? Where has he made a promise that he will hear the prayers which are directed to him for guidance and aid; and is there any thing in the character which is attributed to him, especially as concerning himself little with human affairs, to warrant the belief that he will listen to the supplications of mortals? And let me ask whether the infidel himself does not feel this? Else how is it to be accounted for that infidels so rarely, if ever, pray; nay, that so many of them actually ridicule prayer as unnecessary and even absurd?

But the Christian's God is as far removed from the God of the infidel, in this respect, as the east is from the west. Not only is there every thing in his character to encourage the hope that he will hear the prayers which are offered him in sincerity and faith, but there is a direct promise;—a promise that he will grant his Spirit to guide his people into all truth, to preserve them from all error, to conduct them through difficulties, to resolve their doubts, and to give them confidence in the discharge of duty. This promise the Christian's God constantly fulfils, as every one who obeys and confides in him can testify. As you would not then abandon yourself to walk in perpetual darkness; as you would have a guide whom you may always consult without the possibility of being deceived, I would say, let this God be your God for ever and ever.

But man needs a *protector* as well as a guide; for he is not only in a world of darkness but of danger. Innumerable evils encompass him about, and there is not an hour or a moment but that he is walking amid perils, and for aught he can tell, may be walking on the borders of destruction. In these circumstances, he surely needs the guardianship of some superior Power. Will the infidel's God afford him the protection which he needs? But he is little more than an indifferent spectator of human affairs; and who has told you that he will concern himself with your condition at all? Does the infidel himself trust him? In seasons of calamity, when the world shows its dark side, and the heart is overburdened with sorrow; above all, in the final wreck of his nature, when the spirit pants for protection such as the world cannot give, does he ever call upon his God for relief; and does his God ever appear for him, granting the relief and consolation which he needs? I can point you to many an instance in which the infidel, at such an hour, has turned away from the being to whom he has professedly given his homage, and made an agonizing effort to approach the Christian's God, but I ask you to point me to one in which he has even seemed to trust the infidel's God; much more to one in which he has trusted and found a refuge. The truth is, that at such a season, reason and conscience get the ascendancy even in the infidel; and he is compelled to feel that to supplicate the being whom he is accustomed to call God for aid in these circumstances, were a mockery of his own woe. It were alike vain and absurd to fall upon his knees, and ask the special protection and favour of a Being, to whom he does not allow the exercise of a particular providence.

In the Christian's God, there is every thing to encourage confidence in him as a Protector. For his watchful care is universal and uninterrupted. His eye is everywhere, and his arm is irresistible. And while his providence is

in the highest degree particular, he has *promised* his special protection to those who put their trust in him. And the record of the fulfilment of this promise is written in the experience of all his people. The Christian has called upon God for deliverance in the day of his trouble, and he has been delivered. In the day of sickness, in the day of bereavement, in the day of death, trusting in the Lord, he has been enabled to rejoice with joy unspeakable. And where the Christian is not shielded from the arrows of adversity, even where he is not delivered from the hand of the destroyer, he enjoys the favour of his God still; for adversity is made to yield a harvest of blessing, and death becomes the gate of immortal glory. Well may he say, while he confides and rejoices in the divine protection, "Who is so great a God as our God?"

But finally, and above all, man needs a *Savior*. Is the God of the infidel or the God of the Christian best adapted to meet this exigency of his condition? There are those, I know, who treat sin, the great moral disease of man's nature, as if it were a mere matter to be laughed at; and of course nothing else can be expected but that they should deny the necessity of any redeeming interposition. But the truth is, that in all this there is little sincerity. The infidel is a man; and he is constituted like other men; and like other men he has a conscience, which sometimes raises a tumult in his breast, by convicting him of guilt and pointing his eye towards a retribution. Every man has evidence, independently of all external testimony,—evidence which he is sometimes compelled to feel—that he is a sinner, and as such is exposed to the divine displeasure; that woes heavy and appalling await him unless his sins are forgiven. Now suppose, that with that sense of sin which every man feels at some time or other, you were to think to draw near to the infidel's God for the remission of your sins, and the cleansing of your soul; and supposing him to be all that reason, by her best efforts, can prove him to be;—I ask you whether you do not perceive at once that your case would be well-nigh desperate? For it cannot be denied that well directed reason attributes to the Supreme Being perfect justice and holiness: of course these attributes require that sin should be punished; and the alternative is, that the infidel's God must either punish sin or sacrifice his perfection. When it is remembered, at the same time, that he has given no intimation of pardoning mercy, where is the shadow of encouragement to a sinner to seek forgiveness; or the shadow of hope that it can in any way be extended to him? And if the sinner takes counsel of his conscience, he will find that he needs not only to be forgiven, but sanctified; that a divine influence is necessary to give a right direction to the faculties and principles of his nature, and thus render him capable of spiritual enjoyment. Will you go to the infidel's God to seek *this* blessing? But where have you learned that He is a sanctifying God? Reason has not told you so. Conscience has not told you so. Nature has not told you so. Rely on it, you are groping in the dark, and may as well fold your arms and sit down in despair.

Turn now to the God of the Christian, and behold in him the Savior that you need! He reveals himself as the Lord our Righteousness, and the Lord our strength; as the just God and the merciful; as forgiving iniquity, not at the expense of his perfections, but in a manner which renders his perfections more gloriously conspicuous—through the sacrifice of his own Son. And he gives his Spirit too, as the Sanctifier of the people; to subdue their

rebellion, to implant within them a principle of holiness, and to train them up for an eternal residence in the heavens. I appeal to the noble army of martyrs, and the spirits of the just made perfect—the redeemed who cast their crowns at the foot of the throne, whether this be not so. And lest this should seem like a blind sally of imagination, I appeal to you, Christians, yet in the midst of your conflict,—to every one of you who worships the Christian's God in sincerity and in truth—whether it be not so. Can you not stand up and testify for your God, that when your conscience was burdened with guilt, he graciously removed the burden by the application of the blood of his Son; that while sin rankled unsubdued in your bosom, he struck a blow which disarmed it of its power; that in all your conflicts his grace strengthens you; and that you carry in your bosom a pledge that his grace will perfect your sanctification, and confer upon you an unwithering crown?

I cannot conclude without applying this argument in one word to a practical use. Let me ask then, who among you all will dare to trust his interests for time and eternity in the hands of the infidel's God? Dare you trust him as your guide, when there are so many devious paths in which you are in danger of being lost; especially when he has given you no promise of his guidance, and there is nothing in his character which should lead you to expect it? Dare you trust him as a refuge, when you do not know that he even hears the prayers which you send up to him in your trouble; and when you do know that there is not an hour of your life, but that every earthly refuge is liable to fail you? Dare you trust him as a Savior, when he claims no such character? Dare you approach him with your heart burdened with guilt, and plead with him for forgiveness, when he has said nothing and done nothing to inspire the least hope of pardon, and when, for aught that you can see, pardon must involve the wreck of his attributes? Dare you ask him to sanctify you, or grant you grace to help in time of need, when, as a sinner, you have forfeited every favor, and have become obnoxious to his wrath? Dare you trust him in the hour of your extremity? Dare you lift up your eyes to him on the bed of death, and ask him to save you: amid the shudderings of guilt, amid the convulsions of pain, amid the uncertainty, the darkness; perhaps the wailings, of that last hour, dare you, I ask, take the God of the infidel for your portion, and throw that deathless spirit of yours on his protection for eternity? Above all, dare you do this, when thousands who have done it before you have testified in the dark valley that they were without a refuge, and have died reproaching themselves for their wretched infatuation?

I know that there is not one of you but would shudder to answer these fearful interrogatories in the affirmative; not one who dares to sit down and deliberately count the cost, and then commit his interests for time and eternity into the hands of the infidel's God. And if you dare not do so deliberately, and with your eyes open, be not so infatuated as to leap inconsiderately into these territories of doubt, and horror, and death. Turn your eye then towards the God of the Christian, and you will find a Being infinitely venerable, altogether lovely; a Being, the devout contemplation of whose character will exalt you from glory to glory; whom you may confidently trust as a guide, a protector, and a Savior; who will sustain you by the right arm of his power and grace while the current of life is ebbing away; and who will keep your immortal spirit safe and happy amid the shocks of the last day.

But remember, that in order that the Christian's God may become your portion, you must yield your hearts and lives to his service. It is not enough that you profess your faith in him, or even that you have some emotions of sublimity or rapture in meditating on his attributes. You must love him, trust him, obey him. Then, I repeat, you may be fearless in adversity; fearless in death; fearless amid the funereal fires of the world.

SERMON CXXXV.

By WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D.D.

ALBANY, N. Y.

CHOOSING THE GOOD PART.

LUKE x. 42.—*And Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.*

Oun blessed Lord, when he was on earth, partook largely of all the common sufferings of human nature. Though he was Lord of the creation, and could always have supplied his own necessities and those of his disciples by miraculous agency, yet, instead of availing himself of his divine power, he suffered many of his wants to go unsupplied, and for the supply of others he cast himself on the hospitality of his friends. There was a family at Bethany who were peculiarly endeared to him; who, in one case, at least, and probably in many others, experienced largely of his kindness, and with whom he seems always to have been a most welcome guest. Passing through their village on his way to Jerusalem, he called to see them; not in the spirit in which it is common to call upon people in these days, as a mere matter of ceremony, but from feelings of genuine affection, and with an earnest desire to do them good. The two sisters, Mary and Martha, seem both to have given him a most cordial welcome; though they exhibited their attachment and joy in very different ways: the one by endeavoring to provide for him an entertainment; the other by sitting at his feet, and listening to his instruction. Martha, observing the course which her sister was taking, in a moment of impatience, complained to the Master that she was left to serve alone, and begged of him the favor that he would bid Mary come to her assistance. But behold, Martha, who no doubt expected commendation, was met with rebuke! "Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful. And Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Is there not reason to believe that if our Lord were now on the earth, he might often find occasion to offer a similar rebuke? And to be plainer still, is there not reason to believe that many a woman, and many a good woman too, loses much of the benefit to be derived from intelligent and pious visitors,

from the fact that, like Martha, she is cumbered about much serving; that she thinks more of providing a sumptuous entertainment than of having her soul refreshed by edifying and profitable conversation.

The commendation which our Lord bestowed upon Mary is contained in the words of our text:—"And Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Let us analyze this passage a little, and see what instruction we can gather from it.

I. The first thought which this passage obviously suggests is, that *religion is a matter of deliberate choice*. "Mary hath chosen that good part."

To choose is an act of the soul which every one perfectly understands, and which cannot be made more obvious by explanation; inasmuch that if you should hear a philosophical lecture on the subject of choice, you would after all come back to your own consciousness to know what it is. We say then that religion is just as much an object of choice as any thing else. If you are hereafter to become religious, it is certain that you will choose to become so. If you remain in your sins, it is equally certain that you will choose to remain in them. There is indeed truth, yes, and glory too, in the doctrine of a divine influence; but that does not interfere at all with your freedom; it leaves you with the full power of choice, with all the responsibilities of a moral agent.

This is the doctrine of the Bible. "Choose ye this day," says Joshua, "whom ye will serve." It is taken for granted in all the promises and threatenings of the Bible; in the terms on which salvation is offered; in the whole system of means and motives which the gospel exhibits. It is the doctrine of reason, and on it hangs the doctrine of a retribution. It is the doctrine of experience; for every one that has set his face towards heaven is conscious, and is ready to testify, that he has done it by a voluntary act; and notwithstanding all the cavils of irreligious men, I venture to say that every one who is walking in the way to death, feels, when he allows himself to reflect, that he is perfectly voluntary in the course he is pursuing. We will for a moment illustrate this truth, under two or three particulars.

There is choice connected with the assent which the mind yields to the divine authority of the Scriptures. I do not mean that the mind must not be determined in its judgments by the evidence which is actually before it; or that it is possible for a man to believe in one way when he perceives that the evidence preponderates in another; but then it may be and is a matter of choice with him, whether he will examine the evidence at all; and if so, whether he will examine it impartially, seeking divine guidance, and holding his mind in a state to admit the truth, whatever he may find it to be. One man chooses to investigate this subject with a teachable and humble spirit; and he sees evidence perfectly conclusive that the Bible is an inspired book. Another chooses to investigate it in an opposite spirit; and he decides against its claims to inspiration. The act in either case is perfectly voluntary.

And what is thus true of the evidences is not less so of the doctrines of Christianity. In a certain sense it is true that a man may believe them or not believe them as he pleases; because it is left at his pleasure whether to examine them or not to examine them; and whether to approach them with the spirit of a cavalier, or the spirit of a docile inquirer. Some of you per-

haps know little of the Bible, and have never read it with any attention in the course of your lives, and of course can have no intelligent belief of its doctrines. Now if the reason of this is asked, what other reason can be given than that you choose to let the Bible alone; especially as you live in a land where the Bible is no rare book, and as you do not belong to a sect that prohibits or discourages the use of it? There are others among you who have made the Scriptures your constant study, and who meditate upon them when you lie down and when you rise up, and who have a thorough knowledge of their contents, and a full belief of their doctrines. And here again, what reason is to be given for this other than that you choose it should be so? Will any one of you say that he was conscious of more constraint in sitting down to study his Bible than in going out to attend to his worldly business? Did you ever dream that you had less liberty in the one case than in the other?

Again—there is the same exercise of choice in the soul's acceptance of a Savior. The two objects which present themselves with their claims to our supreme affection are, on the one hand, the Lord Jesus Christ, and with him all the benefits of his redemption, and on the other, this present world, with all that it has to bestow. Now the sinner, so long as he remains unrenewed, chooses the latter. He chooses it so intensely, if I may be allowed the expression, that he rolls it as a sweet morsel under his tongue. During this period this world seems to him every thing; it occupies the whole field of his vision; but Christ and his salvation—(they may be something good for aught he knows,)—but he does not discern their excellence and glory, and therefore he does not choose them. But under the enlightening influences of the Spirit, his views change; and the world dwindles to nothing, and Christ becomes all in all; and he chooses Christ as his portion now as deliberately as he chose the world before. Let every Christian say whether I have not spoken to his own experience. Not that I would detract aught from the blessed agency of God's Spirit: no Christian will ever forget on earth or in heaven that it was by the grace of God that he became a new creature; but I venture to say that every Christian is conscious of having been as voluntary in the act of giving himself to God as in any other act of his life. And one proof of it among many is, that he condemns himself for not having done this act before.

I might go on to say that there is equally the exercise of choice in all the Christian's growth in grace; in his prayers; in his social intercourse; in his attendance on the means of religion; in his improvement of the dispensations of Providence; in every thing, in short, that enters into his progress in the divine life. But instead of extending my remarks under this article, I pass to

II. A second general observation suggested by the text, viz. that *he who chooses religion chooses a good part*. "*Mary hath chosen that good part.*"

Is not this manifest when you consider that he who chooses religion chooses a portion for his soul? What is the body? Mere corruptible matter; destined ere long to become disorganized, and to remain so perhaps for ages. And the whole animal nature—what is it? It is that which proclaims to us that we are of the earth, earthly; that which would keep us silent, if a reptile should lift up its head from the dust, and claim to be our brother or our sister. Now in making this world your portion, you consult only the

interest of the body ; that on which the dignity of your nature least depends. But religion is a portion for the soul, the nobler part ; that spirit within a man which can dart from pole to pole, and rise from earth to heaven, and hold communion even with the Almighty Spirit. Turn your eye inward, O man, and commune with yourself. Analyze the operations of that principle, that spirit, that invisible something which you call your soul, and which emphatically constitutes yourself. Observe its amazing powers, capable of an indefinite and, for aught that appears, an eternal expansion. Mark its sublime aspirations ; its ethereal tendency ; its reachings down into the future as well as its excursions through the past. I have said that religion is a portion for the soul. And how ? By satisfying all the soul's desires, great and boundless as they are. By furnishing proper exercise for its powers, thus causing them to expand and brighten into angelic powers, and to approximate more and more for ever to the perfections of the Highest. If then the soul be the nobler part of the man, and if religion is a portion for the soul—an adequate portion—a satisfying portion, who will not say that he who chooses religion chooses a good part ?

Again—this is the good part, because *it is the right part*. There is an original immutable distinction between right and wrong. Men in the hardness of their depravity may strive to annihilate that distinction, but conscience nevertheless recognises it, and asserts it, and maintains it, though in doing so, it often makes war upon the passions. I will not agitate the question, as it is a mere question of metaphysics, whether this distinction be founded primarily in the will of God or in the nature of things : I assert nothing here but the reality of its existence : and I say that religion is a good part, because it is the right part, in reference to the grand distinction of which I have spoken. God, as a perfect Being, must love holiness and hate sin ; and in accordance with the perfection of his nature, he must and does require holiness and forbid sin ; and there is a principle in every man's moral nature which entirely justifies this grand feature of the divine administration. Now he who is truly religious acts in accordance with the will of God, with the moral character and government of God ; in short, in accordance with what every moral being in the universe feels to be right, and with what *is* right. I ask again then, in view of *this* consideration, whether he who chooses religion does not choose a good part ?

But observe still further, that in making this choice, *all the interests of the soul become identified with the interests of Jehovah himself*.

The views which God entertains of the characters of men are regulated by a regard to this broad and original distinction of which I have already spoken : those who are on the side of righteousness he regards his friends ; those of the opposite character, his enemies ; and these views determine his conduct towards them. There are qualifications necessary, you know, to introduce men to particular stations and societies on earth ; and there is a qualification necessary to introduce a man into God's gracious kingdom ; and that qualification is religion ; but the moment he is thus introduced, he has all the perfections of Jehovah pledged for his protection, and comfort, and ultimate triumph. His interest becomes Jehovah's interest. All God's gracious promises it becomes his privilege to appropriate ; promises which he can lean upon with joyful confidence in the day of adversity, in the day of temp-

tation, in the day of death. Can you doubt whether that be a good part which secures to you everywhere an Almighty protector and friend?

And then again, remember that this is a *portion for eternity*. Do you envy that man whose laurels seem so bright and thick upon his brow, and whose splendid political, or military, or literary achievements have caused his name to ring through the world? Envy him not; for the grave that receives his body will receive his glory too. That is not a portion for eternity. Do you covet the condition of the man who in the pride of his heart counts up his millions, and moves in splendor, and riots in luxury? Believe me, there is nothing there which you need greatly to desire; for all that silver and gold is perishable, and it will be melted down, if not sooner, in the fires of the last day. Do you value the pleasures of friendship? These are indeed valuable; but unless it be a sanctified friendship, the enjoyment which it yields will not reach beyond the grave. But religion—it not only consults the best interests, and the loftiest, noblest desires of the soul, but it does this through eternity. It does much indeed in the present life. It drives away darkness; it delivers from the shuddering of guilt; it alleviates sorrow; it acts as a safe guide in difficulties; it secures to the soul communion with God; and stands by it as a helper in the dark valley, and lifts the curtain and lets in some light from heaven upon the eye that death is rendering blind to the objects of the world. I say religion does much for the soul here; but it is not till the soul lets go its hold upon the world that religion displays its noblest triumph. Oh, it is in heaven, where all is brightness to the eye, and all is melody to the ear, and all is transport to the soul, that religion does her best, her noblest work. And as the soul is immortal, so are the joys of religion immortal. As the soul is capable of an illimitable expansion, so religion is capable of ministering for ever to its increasing joy. Oh, what will not the soul gain from religion in its whole course through everlasting ages. I ask once more, does not he who chooses religion choose the good part?

III. I proceed to a third and last observation from the text, which is, that *he who possesses religion has that which he can never be deprived of*. "Mary hath chosen that good part which cannot be taken away."

This is rendered certain by the promise of God. He has declared concerning his people, that none shall ever pluck them out of his hand; and that they shall be kept by the power of his grace through faith unto salvation. Hear the triumphant language of Paul. "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather that is risen again; who is even at the right hand of God; who also maketh intercession for us."—"For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Yes, there is the testimony of him who openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth, to the truth that God's people will be kept to the day of final redemption; in other words, that he who chooses religion for his portion chooses that which cannot be taken from him.

There is another consideration that evinces this, drawn from the nature of religion. We sometimes speak of religion as if it were something without the man; but then we speak of it figuratively: it is really something within him; or, may I not even say it is the man himself, renewed after the image of

Christ! An enemy might as well think to deprive a man of his understanding, or his conscience, or any of the faculties of his soul, as of his religion; for religion is nothing else than the impulse, the direction which the soul has received. You may confine a man in a dungeon; you may throw him into chains; you may bring him to the scaffold, or even light the fagots upon his body; but you cannot wrest from him his religion: that immortal spirit you cannot harm: that principle of divine grace in the heart you cannot reach; and you need not wonder if it should mock your impotent efforts, and even neutralize torture, and make him serene and joyful while the flames or the rack are liberating the spirit for its ascension to glory. Read the records of Christian martyrdom, and you will be convinced that I am not supposing an impossibility.

How unlike in this respect is this good part from any thing that is pursued or valued as a portion by the children of the world! Your riches take to themselves wings and they are gone. Your splendid mansions, with all that they contain, burn down at midnight. Your ships laden with the treasures of other lands go down in the dark ocean. The laurels which decorate your brow fall off, and the high ground of honour on which you had stood sinks from beneath your feet, and perhaps a grave is opened in which is buried even your good name. Health too—Oh how it flies before the withering power of disease; and those roses that bloomed with so much verdure and beauty fade; and the countenance grows pale, and the eye deathlike! And even life—life, on which every other earthly good depends—we hold it by so frail a tenure that it can scarcely stand before the touch of an insect. But not so with this blessed portion of the soul. Come poverty, come sickness, come bereavement, and religion will shine out upon those dark scenes, in all her brightness and all her majesty, just as the setting sun tinges with a hue of glory the evening cloud. Come death, that enemy at which nature shudders, and reason justifies the shuddering; come dressed in thy darkest attire, and armed with thy sharpest arrow, and moving as if there were vengeance in thy footsteps,—and religion will look thee in the face and smile: she will not resist, nor desire to resist thee in thy work; for what thou art doing is necessary to the accomplishment of *her* purposes; but she will protect the spirit whilst thou art exerting thy power upon the body; and then she will open the door of the sepulchre with one hand, and the door of the palace of the King of Glory with the other. Oh, the triumphs, the immortal triumphs of religion!

1. On a review of our subject, we remark, first, that *if sinners perish, the blame must be upon themselves*. Sinners in this world, when they are pressed with the obligations of religion, not unfrequently put their consciences to sleep by cavils respecting their inability, or the decrees of God; but at the judgment, if not before, they will see that all this was a miserable course of trifling, and that the reason why they are on the left-hand is, that they chose a course which they knew would prevent their being on the right; that the reason why they are not admitted to the joys of eternal life is, that life and death being placed before them, they madly chose death. Does the question arise, why all who are before me are not Christians? With the Bible in my hand, I dare give no other answer than that uncomfortable and condemning one, that it is because you do not choose to be Christians; in other words, you do not choose to yield yourselves to the influences of the Holy Spirit, or to make all the sacrifices which are involved in giving the heart to God. That

you would be willing to live a life of sin, and go to heaven when you die, admits of no question; but to deny all ungodliness and every worldly lust, and engage actively and perseveringly in the service of Christ—this is more than you choose to undertake. Say then, if you perish, where will the blame of your perdition rest, if it do not rest upon yourself? When God says to you, "Thou hast destroyed, or art destroying thyself," what hast thou to answer? What answer will you be prepared to give, when that fearful charge shall ring in your ears, in connexion with the irrevocable sentence that dooms you to everlasting burnings?

2. You may gather some light from this subject, *in respect to the process of becoming a Christian*. It often happens in respect to persons under the awakening influences of God's Spirit, that they are exceedingly perplexed in respect to the course they shall pursue; in respect both to the nature of the desired change, and the means by which it is to be effected. But if what you have heard be correct, this difficulty must be in a great measure removed. What you have to do is to choose God as the portion of your soul; his service as the employment of your life; his will as the rule of your duty; his glory as the end of your actions. Now I admit that you cannot make this choice unless you really see ground for it; but if you do not see it, remember it is your sin, not your apology. Yield yourself then, I pray you, to solemn reflection on your own wretched condition as a sinner; on the character of God; on the law of God; on the reasonableness of the claims which he makes upon you; on the provision which he offers for your salvation; and in all this cast yourself on the influences of his Spirit, beseeching him to work within you both to will and to do. You see then that religion begins in reflection; and reflection, under a divine influence, leads to that decisive act by which Christ is chosen as the soul's everlasting portion.

3. Finally: *Happy they who have secured this good part!* Only let me be assured that a fellow-mortal is interested in Christ's salvation, and in the estimate which I form of his happiness, I will not ask whether he is a king or a beggar; whether he is clothed in rags, or in purple and fine linen; whether the dark cloud of affliction is hanging over him, or he is rejoicing in the effulgence of earthly prosperity. Because, whether his home be a cabin or a palace, whether his path through the world be planted with thorns or strewn with roses, I know on the authority of Eternal Truth, that ere long he will be a king and a priest unto God, will breathe the air, and rejoice in the beams, and join in the melody, and walk about the golden streets of the heavenly paradise. I know that there will be a crown upon his head, and that his heart will be full of ecstasy, while he casts that crown at his Redeemer's feet, and bows and sings and shouts with holy reverence and seraphic fire. Art thou afflicted then, Christian? Bear it without a word. Art thou poor? No, thou art heir to all the treasures of heaven. Does thy conflict seem sharp and bitter? God thy Redeemer is coming to terminate it quickly, and cause that spirit now struggling with corruption to rise, and soar, and range upon the plains of immortality. Oh is it any wonder that the dying Christian, with heaven in his eye and heaven in his soul, longs to depart? Is it any wonder that it is so often the last office of the faltering tongue to exclaim, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!"